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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	CIAE-00	DOTE-00	PERC-00	DS-00	EB-00
	FAAE-00	FBIE-00	VC-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	VCE-00	DCP-01
	NSAE-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-02	NFAT-00	SAS-00	/003W
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FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8497  
INFO ASEAN COLLECTIVE  
AMEMBASSY BEIJING  
SECDEF WASHDC  
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 003099

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/01/13

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SUBJECT: ASSESSING NONG DUC MANH'S LEADERSHIP

1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR RAYMOND BURGHARDT,  
REASON: 1.5 (D)

2. (C) SUMMARY. NONG DUC MANH IS PERHAPS THE MOST  
TELEGENIC VIETNAMESE LEADER SINCE HO CHI MINH. DESPITE  
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CONSTANT MEDIA EXPOSURE, LITTLE IS KNOWN OF HIS  
PERSONAL VALUES OR ALLIES. WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF HIM  
AS A POLITICAL REFORMER ARE LIKELY OFF THE MARK, AS  
MANH MORE PROBABLY SHARES THE CONVICTIONS OF HIS PEERS  
ABOUT THE NEED FOR THE CPV TO RETAIN EXCLUSIVE  
POLITICAL POWER AND TO MOVE DECISIVELY TO COUNTER-ACT  
WOULD-BE CHALLENGES TO "NATIONAL SOLIDARITY." END  
SUMMARY.

PUBLIC PERSONA  
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3. (C) SINCE HIS ELECTION AS GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE  
COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM (CPV) AT THE NINTH PARTY  
CONGRESS IN APRIL 2001, NONG DUC MANH HAS RARELY BEEN  
OUT OF THE PUBLIC SPOTLIGHT. AS DE JURE LEADER OF THE  
ALMOST 3-MILLION MEMBER CPV AND AS DE FACTO PARAMOUNT  
LEADER (OF SORTS) OF THE NATION, MANH'S PRESENCE IS  
UBIQUITOUS. RARELY DOES A DAY GO BY WITHOUT A PHOTO OF  
HIM ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE CPV'S "NHAN DAN" NEWSPAPER  
OR WITHOUT COVERAGE OF HIM RECEIVING SOME HONORED GUEST  
OR EXHORTING SOME CADRES ON NATIONAL NEWS. WHETHER DUE  
TO A SUNNY DISPOSITION OR A CAREFULLY CALCULATED SENSE  
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, MANH IS THAT RARE VIETNAMESE WHO  
TURNS ON A SMILE FOR A CAMERA. MOST OTHER VIETNAMESE  
IN AND OUT OF LEADERSHIP RANKS SEEM TO FEEL OBLIGED TO  
ADOPT A DIGNIFIED, SOLEMN DEMEANOR IN THE PRESENCE OF A  
PHOTOGRAPHER. HO CHI MINH WAS PROBABLY THE LAST  
VIETNAMESE LEADER WHO WAS ROUTINELY SHOWN IN A BENIGN  
AND EVEN HAPPY LIGHT IN THE OFFICIAL MEDIA.

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4. (C) FOR ALL HIS PUBLIC PERSONA, HONED AS WELL  
DURING ALMOST TEN YEARS AS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CHAIRMAN,  
MANH THE MAN REMAINS A MYSTERY TO VIRTUALLY ALL FOREIGN  
OBSERVERS, AND LIKELY TO MOST VIETNAMESE AS WELL.  
UNLIKE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY COUNTERPARTS, HE DOES  
NOT ROUTINELY MEET WITH FOREIGN DIGNITARIES VISITING  
HANOI, UNLESS THEY ARE FRATERNAL PARTY DIGNITARIES IN  
THEIR OWN RIGHT. (HE DID, HOWEVER, RECEIVE SECRETARY  
POWELL DURING THE JULY 2001 ASEAN MEETINGS.) HIS  
FOREIGN TRIPS AS GENERAL SECRETARY HAVE ALSO BEEN  
CONSPICUOUSLY FEW: IN 2002, HE MADE ONLY TWO OVERSEAS  
TRIPS, TO JAPAN AND TO RUSSIA AND BELARUS, BOTH WITHIN  
THE SPACE OF A MONTH. HIS ONLY KNOWN VISIT TO THE U.S.  
WAS AS NA CHAIRMAN IN 2000. AMBASSADOR HAS NOT MET  
WITH MANH SINCE ARRIVAL AT POST IN DECEMBER 2001,  
DESPITE A STANDING REQUEST DATING BACK FROM THE TIME OF  
PRESENTATION OF CREDENTIALS IN FEBRUARY 2002. INDEED,  
WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE CHINESE AND RUSSIAN  
AMBASSADORS, WHO ESCORTED HIGH LEVEL VISITORS FROM  
THEIR CAPITALS TO CALL ON MANH, WE ARE NOT AWARE OF ANY  
OTHER AMBASSADORS WHO HAVE MET HIM IN VIETNAM. THE

JAPANESE AMBASSADOR MET MANH ONLY DURING MANH'S VISIT TO TOKYO EARLIER THIS YEAR.

15. (C) JUDGING FROM PRESS ACCOUNTS, MANH MAINTAINS A VIGOROUS IN-COUNTRY TRAVEL SCHEDULE, ESPECIALLY TARGETING VIETNAM'S POORER PROVINCES AND MOUNTAINOUS AREAS DOMINATED BY ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS, LIKE HIS OWN HOME PROVINCE OF BAC KAN. ACCORDING TO BAC KAN OFFICIALS, MANH RETURNS TO HIS HOMETOWN AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR, AND IS SAID TO BE A CONVIVIAL IMBIBER OF THE  
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LOCAL POTENT LIQUOR. THERE ARE REPORTS THAT HIS WIFE REMAINS IN BAC KAN.

WHAT DOES HE STAND FOR?  
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16. (C) FOR ALL HIS MEDIA EXPOSURE, MANH'S OWN POLITICAL Credo OR INCLINATION TO SHAPE IDEOLOGY ARE DIFFICULT TO DISCERN. THE CPV UNDER HIS WATCH HAS MADE A PUSH FOR STRENGTHENING "GRASS-ROOTS DEMOCRACY" AND FOR REINFORCING POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AT ALL LEVELS OF SCHOOLING. THESE APPEAR TO BE COMPLEMENTARY EXERCISES NEITHER IN EXPANDING PUBLIC PLURALISM NOR IN RETURNING TO MARXIST ROOTS, BUT RATHER IN REASSERTING A STRONGER CPV ROLE AT A TIME OF DRAMATIC DOMESTIC CHANGE.

17. (C) MANH WON KUDOS FROM MANY INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS FOR HIS APPARENT EFFORTS TO WAKE UP THE OFTEN MORIBUND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DURING HIS TENURE THERE, INCLUDING SUCH INNOVATIONS AS TELEVISION COVERAGE AND

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	FAAE-00	FBIE-00	VC-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	VCE-00	DCP-01
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FORMAL Q&A SESSIONS BETWEEN AT LEAST A SELECTED NUMBER OF MINISTERS AND NA DELEGATES. SOME FOREIGN ACADEMICS DREW THE CONCLUSION THAT MANH WAS AT HEART A POLITICAL REFORMER, AND, POSSIBLY, A CLOSET LIBERAL. SUCH AN INTERPRETATION DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN BORNE OUT  
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SUBSEQUENTLY. THE CPV UNDER MANH (AS BEFORE) HAS ORCHESTRATED PLENUMS IMMEDIATELY BEFORE EACH OF THE PLENARY NA SESSIONS OVER THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF, AND COMMENTED PUBLICLY AND SPECIFICALLY ON WHAT THE NA SHOULD TRY AND SHOULD NOT TRY TO ACCOMPLISH DURING THOSE SESSIONS. AS SUCH, MANH HAS AT LEAST INDIRECTLY UNDERCUT THE GROWING PUBLIC LEGITIMACY AND AUTHORITY THE NA HAD BEGUN TO ACHIEVE.

18. (C) FURTHER, UNDER MANH'S LEADERSHIP, THE GVN AND CPV HAVE MOVED AGGRESSIVELY AGAINST SOME PERCEIVED THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY AND NATIONAL UNITY, INCLUDING FATHER NGUYEN VAN LY, NEW AND OFTEN YOUNG "CYBER-DISSIDENTS," AND WOULD-BE MONTAGNARD ACTIVISTS. THESE ARRESTS AND CONVICTIONS GO AGAINST THE BROADER TREND OF GROWING PERSONAL FREEDOMS WITHIN VIETNAM THAT HAVE EMERGED OVER THE PAST DECADE. THERE ARE NO REAL INDICATIONS OF ANY IMMINENT PERIOD OF POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION OR GREATER EASE ABOUT ACCEPTING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE CRITICISM OF THE PARTY AND COMMUNIST SYSTEM UNDER MANH'S RULE. TWO MORE PROMINENT ACTIVISTS WERE DETAINED SHORTLY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

19. (C) MANH HAS ACKNOWLEDGED OFTEN AND FORCEFULLY THE NEED FOR THE CPV TO CLEAN UP ITS OWN ACT AND MOVE QUICKLY AND DECISIVELY AGAINST CORRUPTION IN ITS MIDST. THE UPCOMING "NAM CAM" MAFIA CASE IS APT TO BE THE SHOWCASE EFFORT IN THIS REGARD, ALTHOUGH MOST OF ITS OFFICIAL VICTIMS HELD GVN -- RATHER THAN CPV -- POSTS. THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND INFORMATION ON DECEMBER 19 FORMALLY CRITICIZED THE MEDIA (IN PARTICULAR TUOI TRE  
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"YOUTH" AND GIA DINH VA XA HOI "FAMILY AND SOCIETY") FOR REPORTING "IRRESPONSIBLY" AND "INACCURATELY" THAT SENIOR OFFICIALS EVEN ABOVE THE DEPUTY MINISTER-LEVEL WOULD BE IMPLICATED IN THIS CASE.

POLITICAL ALLIES?  
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10. (C) UNFORTUNATELY, EMBASSY HAS NO INSIGHT INTO THE ALLIANCES WITHIN THE CPV LEADERSHIP MANH HAS FORGED, OR INTO THE DYNAMICS OF DECISION-MAKING AT THAT LEVEL. HIS TECHNOCRATIC BACKGROUND AND STUDIES OVERSEAS LEFT HIM PRETTY MUCH OUT OF THE MILITARY/PUBLIC SECURITY LOOP, AND OUR ASSUMPTION IS THAT THESE LINKS ARE NOT HIS MAJOR STRENGTHS, DESPITE HIS CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE CPV'S MILITARY COMMISSION. NOR ARE THERE OBVIOUS CONNECTIONS WITH THE ONCE ALL-POWERFUL PROPAGANDA AND IDEOLOGICAL ORGANS OF THE CPV; WE DO NOT EXPECT SCHOOLCHILDREN TO START READING NONG DUC MANH'S COLLECTED WORKS, OR TO SEE ANY MANH-PRODUCED VERSION OF JIANG ZEMIN'S "THREE REPRESENTS" ENTER THE THE CPV PANTHEON ANY TIME SOON. THE ORGANIZATIONAL/ PERSONNEL WING OF THE CPV APPARENTLY REMAINS UNDER THE DOMINATION OF NA CHAIRMAN NGUYEN VAN AN, WHO MANY ASSUME MAY STILL BE A REAL OR POTENTIAL RIVAL AFTER HAVING LOST THE GENERAL SECRETARY SWEEPSTAKES TO MANH AT THE NINTH PARTY CONGRESS.

GOING OUT ON A LIMB  
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11. (C) WAS MANH'S ELEVATION TO THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP SLOT MERELY A MATTER OF NICE GUYS -- OR AT LEAST SOMEONE WITHOUT ANY KNOWN CORRUPT TINGES IN HIS FAMILY TREE -- FINISHING FIRST? WAS IT DYNASTIC DEFERENCE TO HIS ALLEGED DESCENT FROM HO CHI MINH? IS HE AN UNLIKELY PUPPET OF FORMER "SENIOR ADVISER" DU MUOI OR PENULTIMATE CPV LEADER LE KHA PHIEU (BOTH OF WHOM WERE DUTIFULLY TROTTED OUT AT THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF THE LATEST NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSIONS IN ANOTHER GESTURE OF SOLIDARITY)? OR IS HE JUST THAT LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR CANDIDATE WHO COULD BE COUNTED ON NOT TO ROCK THE SHIP OF STATE AT A DELICATE HISTORICAL JUNCTION?

12. (C) WE DON'T KNOW THE ANSWERS TO THE ABOVE QUESTIONS; NOR, WE SUSPECT, DOES VIRTUALLY ANYONE IN VIETNAM TODAY. WE ARE INCLINED TO BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A LOT MORE TO MANH THAN MEETS THE EYE, BUT THAT HE NEEDS TO PROCEED CAUTIOUSLY GIVEN A POLITBURO AND CENTRAL COMMITTEE PROBABLY NOT OF HIS OWN DESIGN OR SHAPING. AT THE END OF THE DAY, MANH LIKELY SHARES THE

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CONVICTION OF HIS PEERS THAT THE CPV MUST BE VIGILANT  
IN RETAINING ITS EXCLUSIVE HOLD ON POLITICAL POWER AS  
WELL AS ITS FINAL SAY ON THE ECONOMY. THE CPV UNDER  
MANH IS UNLIKELY TO ACCEPT NEW BOUNDARIES FOR PUBLIC  
DISSENT OR TURN A BLIND EYE TO PERCEIVED CHALLENGES TO  
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NATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND UNITY.  
BURGHARDT

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